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Sentence beginnings: Present-Day English versus Old English and Dutch

Dutch learners of English are taught to start English sentences with a subject, and are warned against starting sentences with other material, such as adverbials or PPs. The reason for this is that the pre-subject position in Dutch is rather flexible – it can host contrastive but also discourse-neutral elements, as long as they link the following clause to the preceding discourse or to time and space in general (Los, 2009), e.g. (1) – whereas the English pre-subject position is closely associated with contrast (Biber et al. 1999, Hannay & Keizer 1993), e.g. (2).

(1) **Gisteren** vond ik een schatkist.
Yesterday found I a treasure-chest.

Daarin zaten twintig goudstukken.
Therein sat twenty pieces-of-gold.

(2) **Outdoors**, it was very cold. **Indoors**, it was stiflingly hot.

This restriction concerning the first position in English in turn appears to result in a flexibility of the nature of the subject which Dutch does not have. Most importantly, English allows for a range of inanimate subjects which Dutch does not allow for.

The same contrast between flexibility of the first constituent and the subject can be observed in earlier stages of English. Old English word order partially resembles Dutch word order – both are OV and verb-second – and this gives rise to the expectation that the options for the subject in the clause-initial constituent in Dutch and Old English are comparable as well. This similarity disappeared during the fifteenth century, when verb-second word order and consequently the flexibility of the clause-initial position were lost in English (e.g. Los 2009).

We will present a corpus-based comparative study of Dutch, Old English and Present-Day English, investigating the behaviour of the clause-initial element, regardless of whether it is the subject or another constituent. The data we use is taken from corpora which have been enriched with information concerning the referentiality of clause elements. We expect that Dutch pairs with Old English in the following respects: (i) a lower number of clause-initial subjects; (ii) a wider range of non-subject first constituents; (iii) a higher number of referential (elements within) non-subject first constituents.

References

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